

Point Lookout, Prison Camp for Confederate Soldiers

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Point Lookout, Union POW camp for Confederate soldiers, was established after the Battle of Gettysburg and was open from August 1863 to June 1865. It is located along the coast of Maryland only five feet above sea level, on approximately 30 acres of level land. It was the largest Union POW camp and one of the most secure, as it was surrounded on three sides by water from the Chesapeake Bay and the Potomac River, with Union cannons pointed at the Confederate prisoners from Ft. Lincoln and Union gun ships anchored in nearby waters. There were only an estimated 50 successful escapes.

Prior to the War Between the States, Point Lookout had been a fashionable resort hotel and summer bathing place with over 100 cottages where the elite spent their leisure time. In 1862 with the building of additional facilities, it became a Union military hospital and prison for Maryland citizens who sympathized with the South, and as a supply depot for the Army of the Potomac. In August 1863, it was converted into a prison for Confederate soldiers with a capacity of 10,000.

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During the two year span, approximately 50,000 Confederate prisoners passed through the gates. Although an estimated 14,000 Confederates died at Point Lookout, the Federal government can only account for nearly 3,384 prisoners who are buried at the camp. The graves of these brave men have been moved twice from their original location. They now rest in a mass grave under a 85' towering obelisk monument erected by the Federal government. This was the first monument to Confederate soldiers. The names of the Confederate soldiers accounted for so far are listed on a bronze tablet at the bottom of the monument.

There were no trees or shrubs, only open, sandy ground when prisoners begin arriving in August 1863. There were no buildings for shelter for the prisoner, only torn, moth eaten and rotten tents with one blanket per sixteen men. These provided no real shelter and the ground froze solid in the winter and flooded during the summer. Prisoners slept on the solid ground with nothing beneath them to protect them from the cold. Confederate prisoners were not allowed any clothing, blankets, shoes, etc. from home. Any items sent to them were confiscated by the guards.

Rations for the prisoners consisted of a half-pint of coffee or slop water for breakfast and for dinner, a ½ pint of greasy water called soup and perhaps a small, 3 to 4 ounce, piece of meat. Sometime they received 8 ounces of bread a day. The water at the camp was contaminated with sulphur, iron and other chemicals. It smelled terrible and had a yellowish color to it. Clothes washed in this water turned black and yellow. The food and water provided to the Confederate prisoners was barely enough to sustain life. The Federal Board of Surgeons condemned the water in the camp due to its poisonous composition. Many deaths were caused solely from scanty and unhealthy food and the poisonous water. This from a government that had plenty of both. The guards stationed at Pt. Lookout wrote home about how lucky they were to be at the camp. They told of how they had warm and pleasant housing, more than enough good food, warm clothing, blankets and bunks, as well as good medical care.

The hunger experienced by the soldiers is impossible to describe. Grown men would lie in their tents and cry like babies from the hunger and severe cold. They were forced to go to bed early and not allowed to walk around outside the overcrowded tents in order to try and stay warm.

The health of the Confederate prisoners began to fail rapidly. The hospital for the prisoners was overcrowded with men suffering from all kinds of fever, smallpox and epidemics. Every tent held men suffering from some type of illness. The hospital could not accommodate all the sick, so many were left to suffer in their inadequate tents. Their thin blankets were the only protection from the ground that they had and they were entirely destitute of proper nourishment. All kinds of diseases continued to spread at an alarming rate. Add to this the brutal and cruel treatment at the hands of the guards, and despair and depression became the norm for all of the prisoners. If anyone moaned in their sleep or from pain, guards would often fire their guns into tents, sometimes killing one or more of the prisoners.

It was stated after the war, that there was suffering at all POW camps, North and South, but in the South all was done that could be done by a government that had no more resources, as the

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Northern government did not care for Yankee prisoners and Confederate guards in Southern prisons, were in the same boat. Nobody had enough food, clothing, blankets or medical care. Rail lines between North and South had been cut and the North would not allow any provisions through to help out their own soldiers. Great Britain, aware of the treatment of Confederate prisoners at Point Lookout had a ship sent with supplies for 8,000 Southern prisoners, but the ship was not allowed to dock by the Federal government. Often, Federal prisons withheld food and supplies if they found out that Northern troops in Southern prisons were not getting enough food, clothing or medical care, even though the South could not get these items because Northern troops would not let them through the lines.

In January 1865, the U.S. Congress passed Resolution 97 on the treatment of Confederate prisoners. "Rebel prisoners in our hands are to be subjected to a treatment finding its parallels only in the conduct of savage tribes and resulting in the death of multitudes by the slow, but designed process of starvation and by mortal diseases occasioned by insufficient and unhealthy food, as well as exposure of their persons to the inclemency of the weather." Legal murder was accepted by the victorious North, while the South was tried and convicted of the mistreatment of northern troops. The South tried many times to get the North to agree to a prisoner exchange, but the North always refused. Toward the end of the War, when conditions became desperate, Northern prisoners were sent to Washington to plead the case of their comrades as the South could no longer care for them, but they too were refused.

A Yankee soldier from the 42nd NY Infantry who was held at Andersonville, said that the Federal governments charge that the Rebels tried to kill off Yankee prisoners intentionally was false, and he swore that they did everything in their power to sustain their Federal prisoners. He charged the Federal government with abandoning their own brave men in the hour of their cruelest need. They fought for the Union and their own government would not reach out a hand to save them. He accused them of trying to shift the blame to the South, but placed the responsibility right where it belonged, on the shoulders of the Northern government. After the war, it was proven that the guards and camp commanders made millions by pilfering clothing, supplies and other necessities of life.

Conditions were so bad, that in July 1864, Gen. Robert E. Lee drew up a plan by which the Confederate infantry and cavalry under Gen. Jubal Early would advance toward Pt. Lookout, while the Confederate Navy under the command of John T. Wood, with 800 volunteers, would sail from Wilmington, NC and hook up with Early's cavalry force at Pt. Lookout in a bid to free some 15,000 Confederate prisoners. Unfortunately, the plan was dropped by President Jefferson Davis because information regarding the plan became known to Union authorities.

The treatment of Confederate prisoners during the war is bad enough, but the treatment of their memory and their descendants since that time has been unforgivable. Although there were approximately 52,000 prisoners held at Pt. Lookout and approximately 14,000 who died there, the Federal government will only claim about 3,500 perished at the camp and will only allow these names to be listed on the monument located at the government park in Maryland. As the

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descendants have come to the park each year for a memorial service, the Veterans Affairs officials want to see and approve every word of the programs that are to be presented. In 1998, the Federal government took down the Confederate flag that flew over the graves of these men – the very flag for which they fought and died.

In 2003, a group of descendants purchased a plot of land adjacent to the park and begin building a Confederate Memorial Park there. The park was officially dedicated in 2005 and progress continues to make this a place to commemorate, remember and honor all of the prisoners of Pt. Lookout. There is now a monument listing all of the known prisoners of the camp, both those that died and those that survived. A flag from every state in the Confederacy now flies daily over the park, as well as a Confederate battle flag which flies there 24/7, 365 days a year in honor of these brave soldiers of the South who suffered so much in death, but are now remembered and honored every day by their descendents and the people of the South.